

Sports

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Football: Panthers win ugly vs. Banks County, improve to 5-1

Injuries piling up ahead of Friday's trip to 5-1 Providence Christian

By Todd Forrest
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Union County's 27-7 Homecoming victory over Banks County (4-3, 0-2) turned out bittersweet following injuries to three key players, including star wide receiver Jensen Goble.

Goble suffered a hamstring injury during the second quarter on Friday and didn't return. According to Panthers head coach Michael Perry, the team's leading pass catcher could miss 2-to-3 weeks.

Elsewhere, senior defensive lineman Lane Lance and senior wide receiver Ethan McBride are both questionable for Friday's Region 8-AA road trip to Providence Christian.

Senior tight end Tyler Grasty lent credence to Union County's next-man-up mentality during his postgame comments.

"The main takeaway [from the win over Banks] is, we have some tough guys, but injuries happen," he said. "But we had some guys step up tonight and it shows our team is willing to do what we need to do to win."

Perry echoed Grasty during his weekly interview.

"Despite how awful we played on offense, I'm really proud we still won and that's all that matters," he said.

"I'm super proud of our defense. I thought they played really well. And someone that I don't talk about enough is Zuri (senior kicker Zuriel Mancillas). He did a great job on kickoffs and flipping the field for us on punts. He continues to get better and better and was a big part of our win."

Against Banks, Union County (5-1, 1-0) overcame a two-week layoff, rainy conditions and three interceptions to maintain its 27-7 halftime lead.

Coach Perry didn't implicate the weather for Union's offensive woes but noted the two-week break and injuries played a role.

"I think the layoff definitely hurt us," he said. "Then when Jensen went down, I think [senior quarterback Caiden Tanner] started to force things



Senior tight end Tyler Grasty pulled down a career-high 8 receptions in Friday's win over Banks County. Photo/Todd Forrest

a little bit to make something happen instead of just taking what's there."

With the passing attack out of sync, senior running back Braylen Rader piled up 144 yards and a score on 24 carries. Sophomore Cade Dockrey hauled in 47 yards and a TD on a career-high 5 receptions.

Senior linebacker Kooper Ashcraft recovered a fumble and tallied a team-leading 8 tackles as defensive standout Seth Rutan mends from surgery.

Grasty, who collected a career-best eight catches for 71 yards, discussed his team's adjustments down two receivers.

"Jensen is one of the main targets in our offense, so I told the guys we all need to step up to make up for his absence," he said. "We hope and pray those guys can heal up, but if not, we really need to work hard and grind this week in practice to get prepared to take on a bigger role."

Union County found the endzone early when Goble returned the opening kickoff to midfield then Banks County jumped offside on fourth and

3. Later in the drive, Rader rumbled for 10 yards on third down and short, setting up a 17-yard scoring strike to Goble.

The Panthers' third drive ended with an interception inside the Banks County 10-yard line after Goble's punt return awarded the offense possession in plus territory. Starting at the 36, Rader plowed his way for 2 yards on fourth and 1, then Caiden Tanner hit Goble over the middle for 10 more on second and 6.

On third-and-goal at the two, a Leopards' sack dropped Tanner at the 10-yard line before Banks picked off a fourth-down pass near the goal line.

"It was fourth down so you have to throw it, but nobody was open," Perry said. "But we were able to run the ball, Rader had 144 yards, we just have to finish drives."

With Banks backed up following the interception, Union's defense forced a punt from the endzone, and the Panthers set up shop at the 49 to begin the second quarter.

On third and 5, Union moved the chains when Tanner

improvised by rolling right and finding Rader in the flat for 7 yards with a jump pass near the Leopards' sideline. Three plays later, Tanner stood in the pocket on another third down and fired a strike to Grasty across the middle, picking up 13 yards. At the 11-yard line, the Panthers went to Rader on consecutive handoffs to build a 14-0 advantage.

Banks responded with a four-play, 78-yard drive, capped off by a 36-yard rushing score by Ancy Jacobs.

But the Panthers answered right back, going 65 yards in eight plays to build a 21-7 margin.

On a drive headlined by Dockrey, the sophomore receiver's sliding catch went for 23 yards before putting the finishing touches on the possession by snagging a 5-yard bullet from Tanner on second and goal.

An Leopards' fumble on the ensuing kickoff gifted the Panthers prime field position at the 22. From there, Union

kept it on the ground, calling Tanner's number four times and eventually cashing in from 2 yards out.

After the Panthers' point-after missed wide and the kickoff went out of bounds, Banks moved inside the 10-yard line, but the Union County defense tightened up in the shadow of its endzone.

Facing first and goal from the 9-yard line, the Panthers defensive front dropped Banks for a loss on first down, then forced an errant throw by bringing the heat on quarterback Kolby Watson.

The secondary went to work on third down as cornerback Braden Plott elevated to swat away an endzone pass attempt in 1-on-1 coverage. On fourth down, Union kept the visitors off the board when the half ended on a Leopards' unsuccessful 27-yard field goal try.

Kicking off the scoreless second half, Union County forced a Banks County three-and-out, but the Leopards

picked off Tanner on the Panthers' first play of the third.

But the Union County defense continued bailing out its offense. This time, senior cornerback Nolan Thompson broke up a fourth-and-13 desperation heave to the endzone.

The Panthers took over at their own 19 and moved inside the Banks County red zone courtesy of Rader's 47-yard scamper. However, a costly penalty and a sack led to an incomplete pass on fourth-and-18 at the 24.

During the fourth, Tanner spurred the offense to the Leopards' 13-yard line, but two penalties forced the Panthers into a third-and-long interception.

"No. 0 (Banks County's Aaron Scott) is one of the best defensive backs we've seen this year," Perry said. "We were trying to throw the wheel route to Cade Dockrey and [Scott] came off the curl route and just made an incredibly athletic play."

Banks County threatened one final time, advancing to the Union County 38, but Dockrey got his hands on a fourth-and-6 deep ball thrown into triple coverage.

Tanner finished 19 for 33 with 159 yards, two TDs and three interceptions. He rushed 11 times for 25 yards and a score.

Goble caught three passes for 30 yards and one touchdown; Rader hauled in two grabs for 5 yards; McBride added a 6-yard reception.

Connor Schuknecht picked up 3 yards on 3 carries.

Senior David Heredia recorded 7 tackles, two for a loss, a forced fumble and a sack. Ethan Lester had 7 tackles; Jonah Kluth made six stops with a sack and a QB hurry; Dockrey added 4 tackles and broke up a pass; senior Lane Lance had 4 tackles and a TFL; Carter Deal collected 4 tackles and a hurry.

Schuknecht and Beau Webster added 2 tackles each. Plott notched 2 tackles and a pass break-up; Dusty Aaron had 2 tackles and 2 hurries; Thompson and Taylor Whitehead added one tackle and one PBU apiece.

Union County visits new-look Providence with last year's meeting still on its mind

Union County travels to Lilburn on Friday to face another 5-1 squad at Providence Christian. The Storm are coming off a 51-19 loss at Athens Academy.

Despite the loss, Coach Perry strongly believes Providence features the most prolific passing attack the Panthers have faced in 2023.

"This will be the best-throwing offense we have seen and that's all they want to do," Perry said. "It's going to be a big challenge and their quarterback is good. He's the best throwing QB we've seen all year and they're going to play up-tempo. The offensive line is very big; I think both tackles weigh 270 lbs. They have a bunch of new players they didn't have last year, a whole new coaching staff and we don't have a lot of film on them."

In the only meeting between the schools, the Panthers survived a frantic comeback bid in 2022 following a 35-7 halftime lead. In the win, the Panthers needed a fourth-and-long completion to run out the clock in the final moments of a



Caiden Tanner accounted for 7 touchdowns during last year's shootout vs. Providence Christian. Photo/Todd Forrest

56-49 victory.

Last October's near-disaster in Blairsville is a moment Perry hasn't allowed his team to forget.

"That game gets brought up every single time at halftime," he said. "Especially if we have a big lead; it's going to get brought up."

Union County amassed

644 yards of offense in last year's meeting, led by Rader's coming-of-age moment in a 203-yard outing on the ground. Tanner put up a career-high 403 yards through the air with 4 touchdowns. With three rushing scores, Tanner came within a TD of equaling Pierson Allison's school record of 8 total touchdowns (2019).



Braylen Rader slips a Leopards tackler on the sideline during his 144-yard performance. Photo/Todd Forrest

Softball: Lady Panthers push win-streak to four in 9-1 rout of first-place Banks Co.

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Union County (10-8-1) won its fourth straight in convincing fashion with 9-1 six-inning home victory over first-place Banks County on Tuesday, Oct. 3.

Senior Gracie Gladding walked it off in the bottom of the sixth with her sixth homer of the season, punctuating the Lady Panthers' recent offensive turnaround.

Gladding finished 2 for 4 with a run and a pair of RBIs; Lily Helton went 2 for 3 with 3 RBIs and a double; Sloane Dyer doubled, drove in two and scored twice during a 2-for-3 outing.

Freshman Izzy Anthros worked 4-plus innings of shut-out ball, allowing five hits, four walks and punching out four. Unfortunately, Anthros left the circle in the fifth with an injury, giving way to fellow-9th-grader Zadi Diaz in a 5-0 game.

Diaz picked up her teammate, allowing an unearned run, one hit and a walk.

The Panthers provided its freshmen pitchers with an early cushion via a five-run third that started with a Leopards' error but ended with Union doing the bulk of its damage with two away. Senior Jewel Massey's one-out double moved two into scoring position and senior Georgia Patton singled home pinch-runner Delaney Moses.

Anthros earned an intentional walk, loading the bases



Junior Lily Helton drove in three vs. Banks County. Photo/Todd Forrest

for Gladding, who lined out to centerfield. Dyer's two-out, opposite-field single made it 3-0 and Lily Helton stretched it to 4-0 with another base hit to right. UCHS Homecoming Queen Katie Byers scored Dyer on a single to left, spotting the Lady Panthers a 5-0 advantage.

Anthros departed following a walk to start the fifth, and Banks greeted Diaz with a base hit. With Banks County in business, Gladding ended the rally by picking off a runner at second, and Diaz induced a fly out to center, followed by a ground out to the new third baseman, Anthros.

Gladding and Dyer opened the bottom half with a single and a double, and Helton

Volleyball: East Jackson hosts Panthers in first round of Region 8-AA Tournament

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Union County dropped a pair of 2-1 home contests to Fellowship Christian and East Jackson during its Tuesday, Oct. 3 tri-match to finish 3-7 in Region 8-AA.

Union County enters this week's region tournament as the No. 6 seed and will travel to third-seeded East Jackson to begin postseason play Thursday at 5:30 p.m.

Panthers 1, Fellowship Christian 2 (25-21, 11-25, 9-15) - Union County failed to hang on after rallying from a 20-17 deficit in the opener with 8 of the last 9 points.

With junior Katelyn Brown on the serve, the Panthers rattled off seven-in-a-row, highlighted by junior Lily Brookshire's go-ahead kill with the set tied at 20. Brown's ace made it 23-20 before Union stretched its margin to 24-20.

The Panthers erased early margins of 5-1 and 11-7 when Brookshire's kill and senior Claire Colwell's block put Union on top 14-12.

Fellowship stormed back in front at 19-15 until Brookshire sparked the turnaround.

Fellowship never trailed in the second set, racing ahead 4-0 en route to an 8-3 advantage. Brookshire and freshman Sofia Foster got Union back to even at 9-9 until the Paladins rattled off five straight.

The Panthers held leads of 1-0 and 2-1 in set three before



Junior Lily Brookshire delivered 13 kills during Union's tri-match vs. Fellowship Christian and East Jackson. Photo/Todd Forrest

Fellowship went on a tear, taking nine of the next 10 points.

Brookshire led the way with 6 kills, 8 digs and an ace; Brown added 5 kills, three aces and 12 digs; junior Mallory Rouse chipped in 2 kills, 6 digs and a block. Junior Charlei Robinson had 6 digs and an ace; Colwell recorded one block.

Sophomore Reese Jones' 9 assists marked a team-high. She also collected 5 digs.

Panthers 1, East Jackson 2 (25-23, 25-19, 15-13) - In a replay of the Fellowship match, Union closed the regular season by taking the opening set before dropping the next two.

Brookshire collected 7 kills and 5 digs; Brown had 5 aces, 5 assists, 4 kills and 8 digs; Jones provided 6 assists, 2 aces and a kill.

Rouse and sophomore Mady Adams added one kill each. Rouse also picked up one ace. Freshman Payton Murphy had 2 assists.

Thursday's winner between Union County and East Jackson will qualify for the Class AA State Tournament. The Panthers and Eagles split their two matches this fall.

With a win, Union County would advance to its sixth-straight State tournament.



Union County celebrates Gladding's game-ending homerun vs. Banks County. Photo/Todd Forrest

UCMS season ends in postseason; UCRD takes three of five from Chestatee

The Union County Middle School football season wraps up with a 5-3 record following a 42-20 loss at Gilmer in the opening round of the league playoffs.

The Panthers finished third in league standings during the regular season, earning

them a trip to second-place Gilmer in the postseason.

Over the weekend, the Union County Recreation Department won three of its five games vs. Chestatee at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

The 1st and 2nd grade teams took care of business,

30-6 and 36-0, respectively.

In the finale, the 6th grade Panthers survived an overtime slugfest 13-6, courtesy of a Joe Moses interception to seal the win.

The youth teams hit the road this Saturday to face Lumpkin County.

5th Annual Hole in Fun Golf Tournament Benefit

On Friday September 29th, Benchmark Physical Therapy, Rick's Rental, and the Glenda Gooch Foundation, hosted the 5th Annual Hole in Fun Scramble to benefit Union County Family Connection (UCFC).

This year's theme for the day of fun was all about horror movies, with several characters making an appearance. The weather could not have been better for a beautiful day on the course. More than 20 teams and 27 sponsors came together to provide support for the tournament.

The donations of sponsors and players will allow staff to continue meeting the

needs of local children. UCFC is part of a larger statewide network (Georgia Family Connection Partnership) that is the only statewide network in the country dedicated to the health and well-being of families and communities. GFCC empowers communities in 159 counties to craft local solutions based on local decisions.

In Union County, Family Connection is fortunate to be housed in the school system, where we can work closely with students and families. We have been in existence since 1998 and have developed relationships with numerous agencies and organizations in order to research

the needs of children and families in our community, and to work together to address those needs.

Our mission is: Every child in Union County will grow up to become a successful, productive and contributing adult. If you would like to make a donation or would like more information about Union County Family Connection, please contact us at 706-835-4351.

Our heartfelt appreciation goes out to each player, sponsor, volunteer, and business who participated.

Thank you for making this event such a success! We look forward to next year!



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Deklin Jones (5) served as a captain during the 4th grade game. Photo/Todd Forrest



James Hopple (27) celebrates a touchdown during the 2nd grade's win. Photo/Todd Forrest



Joe Moses' first-half TD catch gave Union County's 6th graders a 6-0 lead. Photo/Todd Forrest